

maelstrom

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'MAELSTROM - ships destroyed in a 'Maelstrom' whirlpool, vortex, eddy, swirl, charybdis. The 'Maelstrom of war' turbulence, tumult, uproar, commotion, disorder, disarray, chaos, confusion, upheaval, pandemonium, bedlam.'
(The Concise Thesaurus)

I begin this exploration acknowledging a deeply felt belief that all survivors of abuse, girls and women, boys and men, were robbed of their rights as human beings and were damaged by that experience. The violation of human beings, by human beings, is too terrible to utter aloud. These atrocities refuse to be buried, remembering and telling the truth about what happened is essential for healing and restoration. Each unique individual has the right to effective treatment and support, the right for justice, comfort and freedom.

Services for survivors are certainly too few. What is also evident is that services for male survivors and literature on the subject of men and abuse is even less than that for women and there are definitely specific issues of particular salience for men.

Recently a homeless man who was raped by two men on the streets of London rang Rape Crisis who told him they were a service for women. He was afraid to go to the police as he believed they would be pleased it had happened to him because of his history of trouble on the streets, and he did not want to

approach any services. The next day the two perpetrators sat in a café over the road watching him as he sat on the street. In a great deal of distress he called a friend who then attempted to find help. After many calls and frustrating dead ends she finally found a counsellor who could help with the trauma.

A man seeking advice from me expressed his frustration and distress saying, "Why aren't there any services for men? All the bloody help there is, is for women". I was able to direct him to a counsellor who I believed could help.

These are some of the reasons I wanted to focus on the impact of abuse on boys and men.

As a survivor and also as a man I have been uneasy with conventional masculinity for almost as long as I can remember. I have some awareness that I am personally indebted to the Women's Liberation Movement, the Gay Liberation movement, and the Men's Movement, in particular their challenges of patriarchal social structures, and I am aware of the great need for their

enterprise. Sometimes I feel saddened that as a people we cannot move beyond the need for such factions into a higher state of consciousness and equality for the sake of all humankind. A time when the necessary battles are over and the war can end.

Men in general are advantaged by current social structures, heterosexual men more so than others, and yet there are individual men and groups of men who can recognise injustice and are far from comfortable with the position they have inherited. In fact, there are many men who suffer at the hands of this system with an added shame of being a member of the "oppressor class". Men are not excluded from the basic human capacity to share experiences, feelings and hopes. Among those who suffer in this "no man's land" are male survivors of abuse. For the male survivor to move beyond survival, to recover and thrive, there is the struggle to integrate their sense of themselves as men as individuals, as part of the collective male population, and to experience value of self and others, to rejoice in the very being they were created to be. Men are an integral part of the fabric of society. A man who feels how tender and vulnerable he was as a boy can see how tender and in need of protection children are today. He can begin to make good choices about his own life, but also about the lives of men, women and children as an equal part of humanity. Life is precious and we all need healing. As we heal we get energy, our energy gives us vision, and the power to join together, to challenge and change that which destroys, and build on what is good physically, spiritually and emotionally, within and without us.

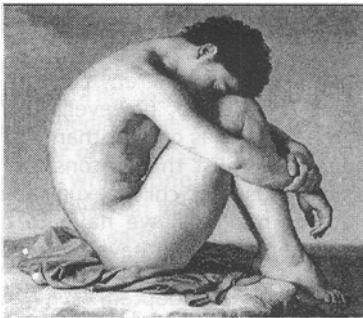
I began looking at the specifics of the male survivor by looking at videos, books, music and poetry containing

representations of the subject. I also painted four pictures illustrating the process for me of victimisation, survival, recovery and thriving beyond survival. I discovered in much of the material such an emphasis on society's view of 'real men' and that even in the most horrendous circumstances depicted, 'real men' don't talk. If they suffer, they suffer in silence, they must be strong enough to brush off pain and abuse and get on with life. The price is catastrophic: they become cut off from truly being men, they cannot fully live and in some cases the end result is actual physical death. This process then led me to want to understand, at a deeper level, more particular issues for male survivors. Even as a man and as a survivor, I feel ill equipped to broach this subject and feel quite overwhelmed by this generous ambition. As Matthew Mendel writes in his book, *The Male Survivor, The Impact of Child Sexual Abuse*: 'As long as the experience of the male survivors is virtually unexplored, the taboo against disclosure will remain as fierce as ever. A primary goal of this work is, therefore, to contribute to an atmosphere in which more men are able to join their female counterparts and embark on the road to recovery. Thankfully, this process appears to be gaining momentum.'

Despite feeling overwhelmed, it is deeply important for me to add my voice to those speaking up for men.

There is a crucial distinction between what makes us biologically male or female and what is culturally seen as male and female. We have our bodies and our sexual reproductive organs which determine our biological sex, but this is not the same as 'gender'. Gender is the way our biological sex is interpreted by society and created by social conditions and culture. Though we

have particular sex organs and differences in terms of the ratios of particular hormones and chromosomes in our bodies, this does not determine our feelings, actions or behaviour as interpreted by our culture, upbringing and socialisation. Nothing in our biology makes us a 'breadwinner' or a 'homemaker' or says that 'boys don't cry' or 'girls don't fight'. While we can't easily change our bodies it is possible to change our social conditions, distorted beliefs from our upbringing, and deeply ingrained ideas of what it is to be a man (or what it feels like to not be what we believe a man should be). Our biological sex does not determine who does and who does not have power, though many who view physical strength as power could say that men are biologically physically stronger and therefore more powerful. These distinctions are important to know,



especially when working with survivors which will be more apparent later on.

Survivors of abuse not only bring their individual trauma and history of abuse, but also their unique experience of growing up as men and women. Where a man is concerned, his concept of masculinity is intermingled with his childhood trauma, his childhood as a boy, his experience of men and women and his beliefs of what men and women are. All this informs the skills and

strategies he creates and uses to survive.

Recently I attended a workshop run by Mark Cresswell from Survivors, Sheffield. During the workshop he referred to, 'Two theories about masculinity', Chodorow's psychodynamic theory and Connell's 'theory of gender order'. My understanding from this is that in the first instance Chodorow works on the assumption that the main relationship for the child is with the mother and that the development of femininity in girls and masculinity in boys runs different courses. Girls learn their female role by identifying with their Mother and boys should learn their male role by identifying with their Father. The problem for boys is 'connected' to the idea of the 'absent father', that in our culture the father is not really physically or emotionally available. Boys have to separate from their Mother to become 'masculine' but their Mother is their primary caretaker. This presents an awful struggle of opposing feelings, his need for emotional intimacy and his equal need to be male. This results in the boy learning to cope by cutting off and repressing his emotions, emotions that are seen as feminine. His Father is not there, his Mother who cares for him is feminine and therefore he must become independent. He grows up emotionally retarded and unsure of his masculinity with a tumult of conflicting feelings inside.

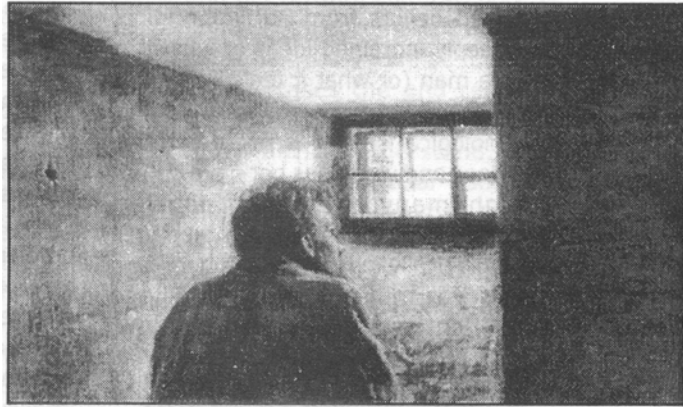
Connell's theory of gender order seems to accept the fact of male power in society. Rather than only talking about masculinity he sees a number of different masculinities that form a hierarchical 'gender order'. Not all men have equal power and male power does not just disadvantage women. For him, patriarchy is also about control and

dominance of men by men. Men are not just members of an 'oppressor class'; some men are also disadvantaged.

Chodorow's theory works on the assumption that the family has a Mother and a Father, for me there are further questions around single parenting, lesbian couples with children, and so on. It also works on the assumption that the Mother is available to the child. I would suggest there is also a case for the 'absent Mother' and the 'absent Father and Mother' where no attachment is possible at all. Where emotional detachment and emotional distancing exist, created by the primary carer(s), the child has a deep sense of its needs, and struggles to understand the awful feelings of loss and neglect. For the survivor the only attention they may receive is abusive, confusing him on every level of his being.

Where Connell's theory is concerned I would also suggest that men can be, and are sometimes, oppressed by women. A strong example of this is when a woman abuses a boy or a man. In the book, 'Female sexual abuse of children - the ultimate taboo', edited by Michele Elliott, says: 'Secrecy, distress, anger, controversy and fear surround the issue of female sexual abuse. Secrecy is deemed necessary because of the hostile reaction many have had to the subject of female sexual abuse. There is controversy because the idea that women might abuse children is new and unproven. Statistics show that it rarely happens and if no one has reported it then it must not happen. Overriding all this is the fear from

survivors that they won't be supported and researchers and writers that their work may have to be revised. Fear too from many professionals who have established themselves within the accepted knowledge of how and why child abuse happens and who does it. The reality is that we are all still learning about this traumatic area of child abuse. We may find that sexual abuse by



women is rare and thereby confirm our existing theories. If, however, we find that the problem is greater than we first thought, we must then reconsider the possible causes of child sexual abuse. Whatever happens, we have to give support to those who have suffered.'

A man who was adopted as a young boy into an affluent family experienced no love or care from his Mother and was relentlessly abused by his Father. He finally sought help on leaving prison. He had been financially successful, was arrogant and independent, but eventually developed a very expensive cocaine habit and disaster followed. He struggled with his sexuality and had no concept of love, care, safety or trust. The only power he understood was money and without it his identity was lost. He is still struggling to face his childhood suffering, to trust himself or

anyone else. He cannot believe that men, women or life in general can offer him anything unless he steals, lies and manipulates it from them.

In my own experience I came from a family where my Father was very busy at work, my Mother was wrapped up in caring for my older brother and I was often looked after by au-pairs. At the age of seven I was sent away to boarding school, struggling emotionally and educationally. This was terrible, I longed for my family, for some love, care and attention. While at school I experienced emotional, physical and sexual abuse. I told no one. By the age of fifteen I had experienced my first recognised breakdown. The problems I encountered as an adult were endless and I ended up in therapy as a result of life threatening circumstances. I was damaged, confused and desperate to my very core. I then went through what felt like an endless process of remembering, questioning and searching for understanding and healing. This was a process which I cannot begin to describe in a few words. The fear of madness, and the worthless shame while longing to be strong, coupled with an inability to express the pain, deep sadness and abandonment I was feeling. The noise of the rage and the tears was so frightening and I had no concept of how to express these feelings and how could I? I was shamed, mocked and beaten if I cried or spoke and I learned to cry silently at night. The struggle led to a point where I could finally love myself and my family while co-existing with the anger and sadness. I could accept they had loved me and yet made disastrous choices on my behalf. I could express and feel the suffering and move towards peace, freedom and intimacy. At last, as an adult in my thirties, I was beginning to experience the care I had longed for,

was at ease with myself as a man, and could honestly respect myself and other human beings.

I will stress again that abuse of boys and men does happen, it is not such a rare occurrence as perhaps society would wish to believe. In a paper I recently read called *See No Evil, Hear No Evil, Speak No Evil*, it says: 'Sampling is an important consideration, since different samples will yield different rates of abuse. Despite the complexity introduced by such factors, it is difficult to maintain the argument that childhood sexual abuse is uncommon for males. The highest estimates of prevalence suggest a problem of epidemic proportions.' (Holmes)

The myths that 'relatively few boys are abused' and that 'abuse has little effect on men' are untrue. Society gives credence to such myths and this can only serve to force the survivor into deeper denial and/or isolation. This also creates an environment where men may not realise that many others have suffered too and they are not so alone, (a lack of services, literature, media coverage, etc. contributes to this). Therefore they may find it hard to expect acceptance and support. The consequences of disclosure often seem worse than not telling. Admitting they were, and are, weak could only result in more abuse in the form of threats, bullying and ridicule, particularly from other men. Other myths that are often heard are 'victims become perpetrators' and 'all perpetrators are men', that men are more likely to externalise aggressive behaviour as a result of abuse. In some cases this may be true, but it is unjust to generalise. The theory is that this aggression may manifest itself in an attempt to reassert the victim's masculinity thereby becoming the perpetrator of abuse. This myth creates

a major apprehension and fear among male survivors, the fear is that 'this is my destiny' or 'I will become or be seen as an abuser'. This fear has sometimes lead survivors to decide to never have children. The paper *See No Evil, Hear No Evil, Speak No Evil* says: 'The fact that some studies have shown high rates of histories of childhood sexual abuse amongst perpetrators of sexual abuse is not the same as saying that similar proportions of abused men will go onto abuse others... It appears that one of the few messages that has got across to male victims of childhood sexual abuse is the inaccurate one that they are highly likely to re-enact their abuse. Such men are unlikely to disclose their abuse to professionals especially if they are adult males with children of their own.' (Holmes)

To help adult male survivors and boys to deal with the harm and wounds they still suffer will mean they are less likely to perpetrate abuse and the cycle is broken. Alice Miller writes in her book, *Banished Knowledge*: 'The fact is that there is no reason for child abuse other than the repression of the abuse and confusion once suffered by the abuser himself. The most cramped living conditions, the worst poverty, can never compel anyone to commit such a deed. Only those who are themselves victims of such deeds and allow them to remain repressed are in turn in danger of destroying other lives.' (Miller)

It seems evident that men do not readily disclose that they have been abused. Here are some possible contributing influences to this reluctance to tell and some other difficulties encountered by male survivors.

- Men may fail to recognise and define their experience as abusive, significant,

or having had a negative impact on their lives.

- Socially, boys and men are encouraged to see sexual experiences as desirable, provided there is no homosexual involvement.

- For a boy, a sexual experience may be culturally defined (by the perpetrator, society, friends, himself) as an early introduction to sexual prowess and 'manhood'.

- The sexual experience may be an initiation into a gang or cult/religious organisation and be seen as a privilege.

- Early sexual experiences are often described and talked about as 'experimenting', 'horseplay' or 'mucking about'. An example given in *See No Evil, Hear No Evil, Speak No Evil* is: 'they outlined the case of a man with a 39 year history of severe psychological problems, which dated back to being anally raped and orally penetrated by older boys. He described these incidents to his therapist as "horseplay".' (Holmes)

- The boy may have been told and believed that he was looking after Mummy. He was 'her little man', 'her little soldier'.

- The abuse may include real or acted affection, attention and rewards. Boys and men may find it hard to acknowledge the abusive nature of these relationships.

- Externally visible physical reactions in boys, for example erection and ejaculation (which does not mean they are enjoying the attention), may lead them to believe they desired or invited the abuse.

- There may be confusion and insecurity around sexual orientation. Thoughts like 'the abuse is what made

me gay', 'people may think I'm gay' 'If I let this out I'll become gay', and 'the abuser knew more about me than I did and realised I was gay even though I didn't know. That's why they did it and that's why I can't trust my own feelings.'

- As a boy I must have done something or invited the abuse.
- Men may have beliefs like, 'Men are sexually active and not sexually passive' and 'Men are in control, they should not lose in a confrontation, they are strong not weak.' These statements are not easily reconciled with the experience of being abused, they do not fit with the acknowledgement of being a victim. Added to this is the struggle to integrate their sense of who they are as men with their childhood experience of victimisation.
- Boys learn culturally that men should not depend on anyone. A man is silent, strong and in charge and it's 'unmanly' to seek or ask for help.
- To be raped, abused, weak, helpless, passive and victimised are all 'unmanly' attributes.
- There is the shame of not being able to prevent what happened. 'If I was a real man, I could have stopped it'.
- Gender shame, the shame about being a man. Seeing your gender as loathsome is not likely to develop a positive sense of self.
- Thoughts like, 'If I can prove myself, it shows the abuse didn't affect me and I don't have to think about it anymore'. This attitude may display itself in a desperate ambition to reach the top of a profession and so compensates for low self-worth. Constant sexual

activity may be a way to reconfirm sexual adequacy and 'manhood'; this is seen as a way of undoing what happened, expressing virility, potency and control.

All these factors only serve to illustrate that there are specific issues faced by men who have survived childhood abuse. They also need to be taken very seriously by caring professionals and the services for survivors that exist. Also what is clear is that more services need to be created and made available for male survivors offering an environment conducive to help men talk about abuse. Helplessness and vulnerability can be enormously threatening to men, and so much needs to be addressed before many male survivors will acknowledge their need for help, reach out and grasp it, and it must be there to be found.

A problem does not exist unless it is recognised and a problem does not exist in isolation. In not being aware, or not wanting to be aware, we create a society where the problem is not perceived, acknowledged, believed, discussed or addressed. We see no evil, we hear no evil and we speak no evil. Einstein once said, 'The world is dangerous to live in, not because of those who do evil, but because of those who look on and let them do so.' And Alice Miller writes: 'It is not true that evil, destructiveness and perversion inevitably form part of human existence, no matter how often this is maintained. But it is true that we are daily producing more evil and, with it, an ocean of suffering for millions that is absolutely avoidable. When one day the ignorance arising from childhood repression is eliminated and humanity has awakened, an end can be put to this production of evil.'

So, what about all the boys and men who suffer in silence and those who, exhausted by the struggle, gave up the fight?

We need to assist men in affirming their masculinity, strength and competence and then help them with the pain of the abuse and victimisation. Male survivors need to see that once acknowledged the experience of abuse is not the sum total of who they are. It was not possible for the boy, the innocent child, to protect himself. He should have been protected, loved, nurtured and cared for. The victimisation says nothing about his 'manhood'. His sadness, helplessness, pain, grief and vulnerability are right and true feelings. His expression and

integration of all these feelings, while embracing his masculinity, strength and competence, will bring energy, freedom and life to the whole of him: The life that was and still is his right, the life and love he deserves in abundance.

I will finish with an extract from Solomon's prose poem, *A vision of love revealed in sleep*. The words and images evoke again the deep feelings I hold for the boy I once was and sometimes still am, also for the boys and men who seek sanctuary and healing today.

*Then, as we went along, while the shallow wave
drew back from the grey beach, my spirit took
upon itself a great sadness; and lifting
my eyes I beheld one, whom I then knew not,
seeking shelter in the clefts of a rock. The shame
that had been done him had made dim those
thrones of Charity - his eyes; and as the wings
of a dove, beaten against a wall, fall weak
and frayed, so his wings fell about his perfect body;
his locks, matted with the sharp moisture of
the sea, hung upon his brow, and the fair
garland on his head was broken, and its leaves
and blossoms fluttered to the earth in the chill air.
He held about him a sombre mantle, in
whose folds the fallen autumn leaves had rested.*

Further Reading

Betty Kirkpatrick, *The Concise Theasaurus*, BCA 1996

Matthew Parynik Mendel, *The Male Survivor*, Sage 1995

Michele Elliott, *Female Sexual Abuse of Children - The Ultimate Taboo*, Wiley 1993

G. Holmes, L. Offen, G. Waller, 'See No Evil, Hear No Evil, Speak No Evil - Why do relatively few male victims of childhood sexual abuse receive help for abuse related issues in adulthood?' *Clinical Psychology Review* vol. 17. Elsevier Science 1997.

Alice Miller, *Banished Knowledge*, Virago 1991.

Simeon Solomon, 'A vision of love revealed in sleep'. Cited: *The Age of Rosetti, Burne Jones and Watts: Symbolism in Britain 1860-1910*. Tate 1997.

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